

## HEART SHOT

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Richard Avedon photographed Isak Dinesen in a Copenhagen hotel room on April 9, 1958. She was eight days shy of her seventy-fourth birthday. He was thirty-five, and in the process of assembling a collection of portraits for his first book, *Observations*, which was published the following year, with a text by Truman Capote. There is a striking dissonance between the words and the images that their encounter produced. Capote's interview with the Baroness took place on her own turf—at Rungstedlund, over high tea—and he followed her playbook. His little sketch captures the wry drawl of her accent, but it doesn't penetrate the mirrored surface of her persona. She strikes a series of practiced poses (her favorite being that of "a figure from her own Gothic tales") and his prose imitates her droll detachment. They drink champagne, though she eats nothing but an oyster. Clara, her secretary, she tells him, is "an appalling tyrant." They were, in effect, cruising each other. If Dinesen liked to collect gay esthetes of an amusing bent, Capote made a speciality of witchy divas. One has the impression of two mutually infatuated yet wary and artificial courtiers dancing a minuet.

Avedon, on the other hand, was rarely, if ever, seduced while on duty, although his great fashion photographs of the same period convey a contagious (and deceptive) sense of intoxication—that of an artist looking at his models with a lover's eye. But his portraiture, he felt, was in a different category: purer, harsher, and more troubling. His aim was to surprise a contradictory truth (the truths of an unsimple heart are, as a rule, contradictory) that was often hidden from the subject, or which the subject wanted to suppress. There was, in that sense, a predatory aspect to the portraits that Avedon didn't deny. He tricked his sitters, he readily admitted, though "not for the sake of the trick"—in the service of a revelation. And his work suggests that he was looking through a lens at strangers or familiars as a way of discovering an image of himself that was both strange and familiar. With more